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ABSTRACT

Creating a safe, open environment for discussion is a critical first step in examining topics of diversity. Because public schools may be the only social arena in the United States where different social classes, ethnicities, and genders come together on a regular basis, it is important to involve preservice teachers in discussions involving different perspectives. Three major sources of student resistance to talking and learning about race and racism have been identified by B. D. Tatum: (1) race is considered a taboo topic for discussion, especially in racially mixed settings; (2) many students, regardless of racial-group membership, have been socialized to think of the United States as a just society; and (3) many students, particularly white students, initially deny personal prejudice, recognizing the impact of racism on other people's lives, but failing to acknowledge its impact on their own. The specific experiences of two instructors (the authors) in two different universities are described as examples of ways to incorporate issues of cultural diversity into preservice teachers' learning experiences. Similar strategies appeared to work effectively in both settings, such as techniques to establish the classroom as a safe environment for discussion of sensitive issues and to develop a sense of community among students. Students in the courses reported that openly discussing issues of cultural diversity in a public forum like a university classroom was a new experience. A primary finding was the need to create a safe environment where students can take the risk and break the taboo of silence that insulates topics of cultural diversity because these are not topics that can discussed with strangers. (Contains 11 references.) (ND)

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Involving Preservice Teachers in Discussions of Diversity

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Running Head: PRESERVICE TEACHERS DISCUSSING DIVERSITY

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Introduction

For 16 months during 1994-95, most of the nation focused on the murder trial in which O.J. Simpson was the defendant. Numerous topics arose during that period of time ranging from the nature of our court system, police practices, domestic violence, and media saturation; however, when the verdict of the trial was announced on October 3, 1995, the attention both in the media and private sectors shifted to the topic that some people believed was the central issue all along -- race. Surveys before and after the verdict of acquittal indicated a split in the surveyed population along racial lines. But can we talk across racial lines to compare how perhaps differing life experiences affected individual's perceptions of the verdict and related issues in this trial? Small, intimate groups of people discussed the issues surrounding the Simpson trial; people talked to others they believed shared their viewpoints.

Within weeks after the "trial of the century," the issue of race again became a feature of mass media reports. Rev. Louis Farrakahn had organized a "Million Man March" set in Washington, D. C. Although the Rev. Farrakahn stated goals as solidarity, responsibility, and community, debate ensued as to whether the message could be separated from the messenger (Alter, 1995), primarily due to the Rev. Farrakahn's earlier statements which were characterized as racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic. Additionally some European-Americans along with members of the African-American community questioned their roles and voice in this event. Race again became an issue. The media provided public discussions among political leaders, university academicians, and news analysts.

A lot of talk has been voiced regarding both of these events; however, small groups of like-minded individuals talk with each other and a few respected individuals talk to the masses. Primarily, the talk from both of these events has been formal and staged, a different discourse style, or informal and private. Most people have yet to talk across racial lines to share experiences, perspectives, and insights. Perhaps in some social settings the option of avoidance is still considered viable and possibly polite; yet, public schools in this country are ethnically diverse. Public schools may be the only social arena in the U.S. where different social classes, ethnicities, and gender come together on a regular basis. Consequently, we need to explore ways to discuss all topics of diversity, including race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic class, sexual preference, religious affiliations, and physical abilities.

Numerous studies have indicated that a primary obstacle to any examination of cultural diversity in the classroom involves the tendency to treat issues of cultural diversity as taboo discourse topics. A first step in encouraging discussions of diversity needs to involve breaking the silence which often surrounds issues of cultural diversity, specifically in teacher education programs where the future teachers often resemble each other socio-demographically. Goodlad (1990) reported that 80% of teachers are female and 92% are European-American. However, Sadker and Sadker (1991) found that in the nation's largest school systems, the student population "is now from 70-96% minority....Some forecast that by 2020 almost half the school population will be from ethnic minorities" (p. 117).

Is Talking about Cultural Diversity Taboo?

Issues of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, socioeconomic class, and physical handicaps

are often considered delicate topics for discourse in certain public arenas. In Paley's (1979) reflections on teaching kindergarten students and coming to terms with discussing racial differences, she addresses the dilemma:

> It was clear to me that I was unable to mention color in the classroom. When I was little we never referred to the color of the cleaning lady's skin....in her presence, we would never say colored, black, brown, skin, hair, maid, or Negro. In other words, we showed respect by completely ignoring black people as black people. Color blindness was the essence of the creed. (p. 9)

Research studies have described this tendency to circumnavigate topics related to cultural diversity, especially race. In an examination of desegregated schools, Metz (1986) says that the "avoidance of mention of race, a kind of artificial color-blindness, can grow up in desegregated schools as a way of managing discomfort and the possibility of conflict around racial differences" (p. 245). Other studies examining desegregated schools have shown that this reluctance to talk directly about race is observable, primarily among teachers (Benton, 1994; Boyle, 1982; Grant & Sleeter, 1986; Metz, 1986; Rist, 1978; Sleeter, 1992). Tatum (1992) looks more closely at this discourse behavior from a psychological perspective.

Based on her experiences teaching a course on the psychology of racism at two colleges and one university, Tatum has explored the difficulties people encounter when talking about issues of cultural diversity as related to oppression. She says that "the introduction of these issues of oppression [listed by Tatum as "racism, classism, sexism...anti-Semitism, homophobia, heterosexism, ageism, and so on"] often generates powerful emotional

responses in students that range from guilt and shame to anger and despair" (pp. 1-2). From her viewpoint as a clinical psychologist teaching in "predominantly White college classrooms," Tatum has identified "three major sources of student resistance to talking and learning about race and racism":

1. Race is considered a taboo topic for discussion, especially in racially mixed settings.
2. Many students, regardless of racial-group membership, have been socialized to think of the United States as a just society.
3. Many students, particularly White students, initially deny any personal prejudice, recognizing the impact of racism on other people's lives, but failing to acknowledge its impact on their own. (p. 5)

Tatum adds that "although many students are interested in the topic [of race], they are often most interested in hearing people talk about it, afraid to break the taboo themselves" (p. 5). Her course guides African-American and European-American students through a process of "racial identity development" (p. 10), an experience she sees as capable of altering how students view and talk about race. In her own college and university classes, Tatum found that people can move beyond these feeling of guilt, shame, anger, and despair that first arise in discussions of diversity to more fully understand their own attitudes toward diversity and to appreciate others' differences.

Tatum's work points out that the avoidance of topics addressing cultural differences, especially race, is embedded in America's broader social and cultural issues. Because this

avoidance strategy has been reported as a pattern (Benton, 1994; Boyle, 1982; Grant & Sleeter, 1986; Metz, 1986; Rist, 1978; Sleeter, 1992; Tatum, 1992), questions emerge for those concerned with education in a culturally diverse society. This concern becomes especially important for those of us in colleges of education who are preparing preservice teachers to interact with students in diverse school settings.

Creating an Environment for Discussion

Creating a safe, open environment for discussion is a critical first step in any examination of topics of diversity. Because public schools may be the only social arena in this country where different social classes, ethnicities, and genders come together on a regular basis, it is imperative to actively involve preservice teachers in discussions involving different perspectives.

Based on experiences as instructors in teacher education courses at two different universities, students informed us that openly discussing issues of cultural diversity in a public forum like a university classroom was a new experience. This position paper represents post-instructional reflection on strategies that worked effectively and has allowed us to continue to explore areas that need further consideration. A primary finding is the need to create a safe environment where students can take the risk and break the taboo of silence that insulates these topics of cultural diversity because these are not topics we can discuss with strangers.

Daniel's Classroom Experiences

I purposefully and strategically attempt to build a community of learners with each

class I have; I begin on the first day of class. Most of the period is entirely devoted to getting to know each other; I am able to call each student by their first and last name by the end of the period (which impresses many of them because they have sat through many courses in which the professor never called on any students by name). I demonstrate a genuine interest in their lives (whatever they volunteer to share) by commenting on their hobbies, interests, where they've lived, and by asking respectful questions. I tell them that they will know more about me than they care to know right now, but that I must be willing to take the risk of them never caring about me before they will feel safe enough to risk letting us know them. I explain to each class that I will provide a safe environment for them intellectually, physically, emotionally, and socially, but some of them must be willing to take the risk of testing its safety before anyone is convinced that it is indeed safe. By the end of the semester I tell them that if we have been successful in truly building a community of learners, they will care about me and each other. One student told me she stood outside the classroom the first week of school and exclaimed to her friend, "Look, Dr. Daniel is beginning to build another community of learners!"

I respect my students and I demonstrate my respect in my tone of voice, consideration of them and their issues as students, by listening to them, and when appropriate by advocating for them outside of our classroom. I do not become defensive when they ask questions about the syllabus, a test item, scoring system because I am very conscious of the fact that I am modeling for them how I want them to treat their students.

How do I know when the students feel that the environment really is safe? When

students make themselves vulnerable and I can feel my heart pound. In a discussion of a young adult novel, No Kidding by Bruce Brooks, a nontraditional student volunteered that alcoholism is more prevalent in society than most people are willing to admit. She then began telling of her childhood experiences and her mother getting her and her siblings out of the house when their father was drunk. She told of the violence she watched; the fear she lived; and the silence she kept. I was responding to her honest and painful retelling of her experiences when suddenly another nontraditional student began sobbing. She tried to speak but couldn't. She held up her index finger and I calmly said, "Take your time; we'll wait." She told us of her childhood experiences with an alcoholic father. We were all moved. I was more moved that this was the first time she had ever admitted to anyone outside of her family that her father was an alcoholic and that her childhood had been painful. Hearing the first student's experience impacted her so greatly because she had never been involved in a discussion of this taboo topic in public much less on a personal level. She went on to explain that her own childhood experience was why she was determined that her daughters were going to have the best childhoods that she could provide them even if some people thought she was too protective.

Benton--Discussing Diversity in Foundations Courses

I have a personal commitment to issues of diversity, and my professional intention is to infuse these topics throughout all of the education courses I teach. My objective is to help my students examine cultural diversity as it relates to aspects of curriculum, instruction, and social interaction in America's schools. Additionally, diversity emerges naturally in an

introductory education class I teach, a foundations course designed for students just entering their teacher preparation program. Foundations courses traditionally examine the educational history, theory, and philosophy of American schools, and my goal has been to work in related issues of diversity throughout.

As with all of the courses I teach, considerable time is devoted during the initial weeks to developing rapport and a sense of community. On the first day of the course, I tell the students something about myself and ask them to fill out information sheets for me. Borrowing a technique from a professor in my doctoral program, I give the students large index cards and ask them to write their names on them, folding these cards in half so that they serve much the same function as placecards at a dinner; this method lets me more quickly learn the names of the students, and they, too, become familiar with the other members of the class.

Knowing one another's names becomes essential because much of this course is devoted to large and small group discussions. I stress that class discussion is important and an integral part of the course. Although I introduce topics of cultural diversity from the first class meetings, I intentionally wait until several weeks into semester to begin talking in-depth about diversity--until the students get to know me and each other. I do this because I believe that these are topics we are more willing to talk about with those we are familiar with rather than with strangers.

Early on, I define "culture" and "multiculturalism" for my students. Most times I find that the students have used "multicultural" as a euphemism for "race" (specifically, issues

related to African Americans), and we discuss how "multicultural" can mean more than race. We talk about how we all have cultural beliefs and values that are very deep, often below our conscious level of awareness, and when we examine cultural beliefs about ourselves and others, it is often unsettling, both emotionally and physically. I even ask the students if they have experienced heart races, palms sweat, or other physical manifestations during such discussions in the past. We acknowledge the initial discomfort we sometimes feel when talking about diversity, exploring how the terminology related to differences changes (i.e.--lady/woman, Black/African American); we explore this changing terminology so that we can begin to understand where part of the discomfort in talking about diversity originates.

In a large group format, as topics emerge through our readings and discussions, I lead the students through analyses of how cultural stereotypes affect most of us to varying degrees. My students in these foundations courses are predominantly European-American, working- to middle-class, and from the same geographic region; while they recognize that people in this country have suffered from, and continue to suffer from, stereotypical labels, for many of them this is something that happens to "other people." To try to reduce the distance many students at first feel from prejudice and stereotyping, I offer myself as a "teachable moment." I talk with the students about my experiences working against the stereotype of the "dumb blonde"; this often relieves tension, instigates some laughter as they compare their instructor to the Hollywood image of the dumb blonde, and shows that I am willing to take the risk to talk about myself.

To further de-objectify the issues of diversity and stereotyping, since many of my

European-American students do not think of themselves as being denigrated or stereotyped, we have large group discussions of the stereotypes of Southerners. The students examine the stereotypes of their regional identity, thus making the topic more immediate. Although many of the students have not experienced prejudice on an institutional level, they can begin to imagine how stereotypes can impact people's lives.

As the weeks progress, we move into small, cooperative learning groups where students share the journal entries they have written to assigned text readings. Small group discussions are often less threatening for most students; also, more people have the opportunity to talk in small groups, to practice developing their own discourse of differences. In small group work I stress the necessity for demonstrating respect for others' beliefs, and as we move our discussions of diversity to the large group format, we discuss again the importance of respect. We continue to alternate instructional arrangements between small and large groups. I am always aware of my role to mediate conflict if it occurs--not to discourage differing opinions--but to make sure that no student is attacked or ridiculed about his or her beliefs. I carefully monitor the level of tension, but I do not discourage debate or discussion.

I have learned from my students at this university that many believe they will encounter little, if any, cultural diversity in their future teaching experiences. Our area of the state is relatively homogeneous along ethnic and racial lines; consequently, even as we move into deeper discussions of how cultural diversity has been and continues to be relevant to American schooling, I often hear, "but, Dr. Benton, there really isn't any diversity where I'm going to be looking for a job." I ask the students to imagine where they hope to live and

teach; then, I ask them to speculate how within the 30 years they will teach, the ethnic make-up of their community could very likely change. Also, I ask them to think about the kids they went to school with--to think about socio-economic class, religious affiliations, political viewpoints, or sexual preference. We remind ourselves that cultural diversity involves race and ethnicity, but it also includes these other social variable. I point out that, in reality, very few communities are truly homogeneous along all lines. It may just be that we have not acknowledged these issues before, but as teachers, we cannot afford to be "diversity blind" when we think about all of our students.

Conclusion

We have presented examples from our own classroom practices to illustrate how we have attempted to incorporate issues of cultural diversity into our preservice teachers' learning experiences. As the works from Tatum (1992) and Paley (1979) point out, we are asking our students to examine what have been viewed traditionally as taboo topics in the public forum of university education classes. We maintain the position that because, like most of us, our preservice teachers have little experience discussing topics of diversity and because American schools are highly diverse, it is our obligation to engage them in these discussions.

In comparing our practices, we have discovered similar strategies that have worked effectively. However, our work in constructing a discourse of differences with our students is on-going. We are attempting to critically reflect on our practices, to continually refine and add to our repertoire of strategies. Our collaboration has shown us that we are not alone in our concerns and we are not the only ones talking about issues that are surrounded by taboo.

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